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Electronic Word of Mouth Effects on Tourists' Attitudes Toward Islamic Destinations and Travel Intention: an Empirical Study in Iran

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to study the interrelationships among electronic word of mouth (eWOM), tourists' attitudes towards Islamic destinations, and travel intention. A ten-minute pen and paper questionnaire was distributed to international tourists in Isfahan through convenience-sampling approach. Reliability and validity of the measurement scale were established through average variance extracted, Cronbach's alpha, and intercorrelation analyses. A structural equation model test with maximum likelihood estimation was performed to test the relationship among the research variables using 189 participants. The empirical results from the structural model suggest that eWOM positively influences tourists' attitudes toward Islamic destinations and travel intention. In addition, tourists' attitudes toward Islamic destinations are significantly associated with intention to travel.

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1. Introduction

Word of mouth (WOM) is communication about products and services between people who are perceived to be independent of the company providing the product or service, in a medium perceived to be independent of the company (Silverman, 2001, p. 25). WOM is acknowledged to play a considerable role in influencing and forming consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions (e.g., Sen & Lerman, 2007; Xia & Bechwati, 2008). With the spread of the Internet, virtual interactions among tourists have become commonplace, which has led some tourism researchers to point out that eWOM plays an important role in the acquisition and retention of tourists in the e-commerce era (Litvin et al., 2008; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). For example, Compete (2007) found one-third of travel purchasers visited a message board, forum, or online community before their online travel purchasing because they believed online reviews would be helpful to their purchase decision. Forrester Research (2006) estimated that 34.7 percent of total online spending is related to travel, and a recent survey indicated that more

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than 74 percent of travelers use the comments of other consumers as information sources when planning trips for pleasure (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). Interestingly, the body of literature establishes that, alongside a number of other factors, the information sources which the individuals are exposed to influence the forming of destination perceptions prior to the visit (Crompton & Um, 1990). More and more tourists are utilizing the Internet and online resources for their information needs (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). To bridge the gap in the eWOM and attitude literature in the context of tourism industry, the main purpose of this study was to examine the theoretical and empirical evidence on the causal relationships among eWOM, tourists' attitudes toward Islamic destinations, and travel intention.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. *Islamic destinations*

The view of Islamic society in the 21st century is one painted by brush strokes of oppression (patriarchal), religious fundamentalism, political extremism, female suppression, violence and lethal terrorist activities. This image results from a number of terrorist attacks in the 21st century by minority groups carrying the Islamic banner. Furthermore, the image of the Middle East is one that has been portrayed as a theatre of war and conflict, from the Arab–Israeli conflicts to the more recent war against terror in Iraq, terrorism in Yemen, the Israel/Palestine conflict, the al Qaeda activity in Afghanistan, and the nuclear issues in Iran. All of these issues have coloured the region's image to one that is not the safest or most stable region in the world (Milton-Edwards & Hincheliffe, 2001).

2.2. *Electronic word of mouth in tourism industry*

The importance of WOM on business has been widely discussed and researched, particularly since the worldwide adoption of Internet technologies, which have revolutionized the distribution and influence of WOM (Goldenberg, Libai, & Muller, 2001). Online user-generated reviews about travel destinations, hotels, and tourism services have become important sources of information for travelers (Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007), with reports indicating that each year hundreds of millions of potential visitors consult online reviews (Tripadvisor.com., 2006). Among these potential visitors, 84 percent were affected by reviews when making their travel reservations (Travelindustrywire.com, 2007). Goldenberg et al. (2001) stressed that consumer decision-making processes are strongly influenced by WOM from other consumers. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) further found that reviews provided by other travelers are often perceived by readers to be more up-to-date, enjoyable, and reliable than information provided by travel service providers. Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) revealed that positive online reviews improve the perception of hotels among potential consumers. Litvin et al. (2008) described online interpersonal influence, or eWOM, as a potentially cost-effective means for marketing hospitality and tourism, and discussed some of the nascent technological and ethical issues facing marketers as they seek to harness emerging eWOM technologies. eWOM is considered an important information source influencing tourists' travel intention and choice of destination (Yun & Good, 2007; Soderlund & Rosengren, 2007; Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Jalilvand and Samiei (2012) studied how the online information influences on the tourism destination choice. They found that online WOM communications has a significant impact on attitudes toward visiting destination and intention to travel. There have existed much opinion regarding the power of eWOM, and most prior literature on this topic is survey based in which respondents were asked to report the impact of online reviews on their travel-related decisions (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). For example, Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) conducted an experimental study among 168 participants to determine the impact of online reviews on the attitudes of travelers to hotels, and revealed that exposure to online reviews enhances the awareness of hotels and positive reviews can improve the attitudes of travelers toward hotels. Dennis et al. (2009) developed a conceptual model to explain e-consumer behaviour. In their model, e-

consumer intention to purchase from an e-retailer is positively influenced by positive attitudes towards the e-retailer. We thus propose the following hypotheses on the basis of literature:

- H1.* Electronic word of mouth has a positive and significant impact on tourists' attitudes toward Iran.
H2. Electronic word of mouth has a positive and significant impact on intention to travel.

2.3. Attitudes toward destination

Attitudes, which are relatively permanent and stable evaluative summaries about an item, are an important psychological construct because they have been found to influence and predict many behaviors (Kraus, 1995). Attitude toward a behavior can be defined as "the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation or appraisal of the behavior in question" (Ajzen, 1991, p. 188). In general, the more favorable the attitude toward the behavior, the stronger will be an individual's intention to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 2001). In our case, the target behavior is the intention to travel, and the attitude is that toward destination. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis on the basis of these findings:

- H3.* Tourists' attitudes toward Iran have a positive and significant impact on intention to travel.

3. Methodology

The empirical study was carried out in Isfahan, an attractive tourism destination in Iran. The target population for the study was international visitors who travel for tourism or other purposes. Since accurate data as to the size and location of this population were not available, probabilistic sampling techniques could not be used. Sample selection was a result of the convenience method. International visitors were selected at different locations including Naghshe Jahan Square, Atashgah, Hasht Behesht, Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Menar Jonban, Thirty three Bridges, and Ali-Qapu. These locations were chosen based on their popularity as tourist attractions in Isfahan. As to size, although initially 205 questionnaires were collected, some had to be rejected because they were not correctly filled in, finally resulting in a sample of 189 valid respondents. Following Jalilvand and Samiei (2012), we measured using electronic WOM by employing six items. Attitude was measured by using modified scales developed by Gamble, Juliusson, and Garling (2009). Items included were very bad/very good, very worthless/very valuable, and very unpleasant/very pleasant. Finally, to measure travel intention, we modified and used a scale with three items developed by Kassem et al. (2010). The final questionnaire included a total of 12 items, and the format was a seven-point Likert type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Table 1 lists the items and their descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, indicator loadings, critical ratios, Cronbach's alpha (α), and AVE values

Factor/Items	Mean (std dev)	Indicator loadings	Critical ratios	α (AVE)
<i>Electronic word of mouth (EWOM)</i>				
(EWOM1) I often read other tourists' online travel reviews to know what destinations make good impressions on others	4.77 (1.123)	0.681	7.184	0.804 (0.763)
(EWOM2) To make sure I choose the right destination, I often read other tourists' online travel reviews	4.29 (1.195)	0.590	6.489	
(EWOM3) I often consult other tourists' online travel reviews to help choose an attractive destination	4.65 (1.018)	0.657	7.015	
(EWOM4) I frequently gather information from tourists' online travel reviews before I travel to a certain destination	4.34 (1.272)	0.621	6.735	
(EWOM5) If I don't read tourists' online travel reviews when I travel to a destination, I worry about my decision	4.27 (1.147)	0.647	6.935	
(EWOM6) When I travel to a destination, tourists' online travel reviews make me confident in travelling to the destination	4.37 (1.212)	0.594	-	
<i>Attitude toward destination (ATD)</i>				
As a tourism destination, I think that Iran is:	5.34	0.660	6.652	0.825 (0.722)
(ATD1) Very bad/Very good	(1.150)			

(ATD2) Very worthless/Very valuable	5.23 (1.223)	0.595	6.205	
(ATD2) Very unpleasant/Very pleasant	4.84 (1.266)	0.598	-	
<i>Travel intention (TI)</i>				
(TI1) I predict I will visit Iran in the future	6.15 (0.749)	0.390	-	0.832 (0.727)
(TI2) I would visit Iran rather than any other tourism destination	6.16 (0.857)	0.409	5.462	
(TI3) If everything goes as I think, I will plan to visit Iran in the future	6.08 (0.808)	0.355	5.060	

4. Results

Table 1 shows indicator loadings, critical ratios, Cronbach's alpha, and AVE values of each factor. Cronbach's alpha coefficients of all ten factors were greater than 0.70 and the AVE value of the factors are greater than 0.05. Table 2 presents the interfactor correlation analysis among electronic WOM, tourists' attitudes and travel intention. They were all below 0.85 and significant by $p \leq 0.01$. All squared correlations were less than the AVE value for each factor, representing good discriminant validity.

Table 2. Correlations

Component	EWOM	ATD	IT
Electronic word of mouth (EWOM)	-	0.593*	0.688*
Attitude toward destination (ATD)	0.593*	-	0.622*
Intention to travel (IT)	0.688*	0.622*	-

Note: * $p \leq 0.01$

As a next step, SEM was tested. The results of maximum likelihood estimation suggested that the model fit to the data well ($\chi^2 = 49.721$, d.f. = 51, normed chi-square = 0.975, $p < 0.05$, RMSEA = 0.000, CFI = 0.998, GFI = 0.958, SRMR = 0.48). All of the links were significant and positive. The three hypotheses were tested. As shown in Table 3, the results supported the hypothesized relationships among EWOM, ATD, and TI. Consequently, hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 were supported.

Table 3. Maximum likelihood estimates for research model (n = 189)

Independent variable	Dependant variable	Estimate	Standardized estimate	Standard error	t-value	p
Electronic word of mouth	Attitude toward destination	0.870	0.827	0.150	5.810	**
Electronic word of mouth	Intention to travel	0.320	0.774	0.128	2.510	0.012*
Attitude toward destination	Intention to travel	0.290	0.709	0.127	2.278	0.023*

**Significant at the $p < 0.001$ level (two-tailed), * Significant at the $p < 0.05$ level (two-tailed)

5. Discussion and Implications

We attempted to identify the tourists' destination choice process in the context of online communications. Results indicated that eWOM has a significant impact on attitude toward destination and travel intention. Further, tourists' attitudes had a positive impact on travel intention. The results have several implications for Islamic destinations managers, particularly Iran that are of practical importance. First, destination managers can build online tourism communities. The tourism website's community is the main place in which travelers carry on exchanging information online, and the travelers may freely speak about own traveling feeling, their previous travel experiences, the service of restaurant and hotel in the community. A good example of consumers sharing

their hospitality and tourism opinions is the website tripadvisor.com- touted as the largest site for unbiased travel reviews which gives tourists the real story about hotels, attractions, and restaurants around the world. Second, tourists' positive experiences of service, products, and other resources provided by tourism destinations could produce repeat visits as well as positive eWOM effects to others. Recommendations by previous visits can be taken as the most reliable information sources for potential tourists. Tourism destinations should keep in mind that providing a pleasant experience for their tourists has a major effect on the development of positive images for non-visitors. Hence, destination managers are able to deal with tourists' comments easily and deliver better and improved tourism services. Third, in tourism industry, there are empirical evidences that tourists' satisfaction is a strong indicator of their intentions to revisit and recommend the destination to other people. Satisfied tourists are more likely to return to the same destination, and are more willing to share their positive traveling experience with their friends and relatives. Fourth, Islamic destinations should adopt each way to motivate the travelers to publish tourist reviews about the destination. They can give some prizes to a tourist who is the member of community if he/ she published a tourist review.

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